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ABSTRACT

The impact dolls have on children's formation of self-concepts is a relevant area for research by interpersonal communication theorists because dolls are admired objects, external expressions of internal convictions, and everyday objects that provide meaningful experiences for children. The more positive qualities of traditional dolls help children realize role identities, give companionship, and provide ego-ideals. The "living dolls" of today, especially the battery-operated "mini-robots," reduce children to a passive role which impedes children from exercising imagination and having satisfactory fantasy experiences. Children are unable to express their emotions when playing with "living dolls" that talk and walk. Contemporary dolls are sophisticated actualizations of our fear of domination by machines. Today's living dolls, intended for quick sale and discard, also reveal much about the lack of permanence and stability of contemporary society. (EE)

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"LIVING DOLLS" AND THE GROWTH OF SELF

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Intrapersonal communication concerns the constitution and perception of self, communication transactions occurring with oneself or imagined with personified objects such as toys. In Personal Growth: the Struggle for Identity and Human Values, writer Clark Moustakas suggests that the growth of the self involves the "presence of a desire or interest that encourages self-expression and activity." Frank Dance argues that "only after the self emerges can there be communication using significant symbols, and this process of emergence initially plateaus at...the intrapersonal level.' Dance focuses on the child's interactions with experienced environments, adjusting to the world of things and the world of symbols. Problems of mental health, Dance contends, often occur at this level of neurophysiological activity. Wenburg and Wilmot investigate "imagined transactions," which occur when one communicates with objects or with oneself, making inferences about how an object will process and respond to a message.[1] They discuss personified objects which are supplied with human communication characteristics. C. David Mortensen perceives "self" as an acting toward oneself through the imagined views of others, and he examines such attributes of self as uniqueness, integration, consistency, and activeness. Mortensen emphasizes the process of self-actualization--the accomplishment of a stable, firmly based, and usually high sense of self and a high regard for others--from which stems a greater self-awareness, acceptance, spontaneity,

independence, and a capacity for intense interpersonal relationships.

This cursory review of some of the literature concerning intrapersonal communication is presented as a context for the following remarks on dolls as objects involved in the intrapersonal communication experiences of children.

Dolls are toys worthy of study because they are common, admired objects, external expressions of internal convictions, and everyday objects that make every day meaningful for many children. While boys may often be admonished for playing with dolls, child development experts and psychologist friends have assured me that there is no danger whatever of imperilled masculinity! Indeed, the black and white versions of G.I. Joe, Captain Action, Big Jim, Action Jackson, and Johnny West are enormously popular variants of Barbie (discussed in detail later),Beautiful Mimi (who sings love songs in eight languages!), Jennifer (attired in red, white and blue pantsuits), Cynthia (programmed to carry on up to thirty-eight different conversations), Crissy, Lazy Dazy, Sweet April, and Sassy Saucy (rotate her left arm to discover her mood for the moment--happy, impish, pouty). All the above-mentioned dolls, by the way, are made of vinyl, whereas dolls of yesteryear were made from whatever material was available--rags, corncobs, apples, bisque, or rubber, to mention only a few.

Dolls also are useful in helping children to discover role identities, companionship, and ego-ideals. As child development authorities L. Joseph Stone and Joseph Church assert, dolls provide an important access to themes of dramatic play, calling forth the

development of feelings of tenderness, care, and protectiveness.

Dolls of the pre-Barbie period (Kewpie, Dydee, Raggedy Ann, Shirley Temple and the like) had eyes that moved, they sometimes said "Ma, Ma," and there were some that could even wet. But--by God--those dolls knew their place! If a child put them down, they stayed put. Children put dolls in chairs, where they remained in place during tea parties. Children showed anger at dolls and stashed them in cupboards. They took them to bed and told their dolls what a rotten day they'd had and how no one in the whole world loved them, and how they guessed they'd run away tomorrow--and the dolls just lay there passively, "listening," and the children felt better for having ventilated their emotions.

Today, dolls have tape recorders in their tummies, and who wants to pour out his or her heart to a mechanical blabbermouth? Little girls and boys of the contemporary period no longer do much to their dolls while the dolls remain passive; it is quite the other way around now--the kids remain passive while the battery-operated dolls swing.

For example, "Jumpsy" jumps her very own attached rope and, true to the American tradition, she never misses! "Talking Drowsy" has "half-shut" painted eyes, which give her a slightly boozed-up look, and when you pull her string she says nice middle-class things like "Mommy, kiss me good night." Her black companion doll, with completely open eyes and a full-blown Afro, says such "lower-class" things as "cool it baby" and "can you dig it". "Beautiful Snow White Small Talk" tells her stories in eight different phrases, talented "Chatty Cathy" whispers, talks, and sings, and amazing "Randi Reader" not only says fifteen different phrases but periodically pauses, in the event

that "Mommy" wants to get a word in edgewise. "Timey Tell" not only tells time, but presumes to suggest what activities tots should undertake. And the ultimate frenetic doll might be "Bizzie Lizzie," for if you attach her to her power pack she will iron, dust and sweep. (I wonder if she has Thursday's free?) There is also the 18-inch talking Gramma doll, a story-teller full of happy sayings (and a big seller among Grandmother consumers). Twist-turn, swivel waisted dolls abound, as do dolls with growing hair. And, of course, there is "Harmony," an 18-inch doll who tosses her hair and strums her "guitar" as her "amplifier" beats out a rock tune.

Lest you think the 500-million-dollar-a-year doll phenomenon concerns only little girls, consider for a moment the amazing success story of G.I. Joe, who hit the kid market in 1964, the year of the LBJ "peace campaign." Joe represents the Barbie concept adapted to the war toy field. Designed for five-to-twelve-year-olds, Joe isn't a doll at all, but a "sophisticated toy soldier" and a "virile fighting man," or so say the PR people from Hasbro. (Incidentally, it costs more to outfit him fully than Barbie, proving that guns do cost more than butter.) Pull the plastic dog tag on the 1968 model and Joe says instructive things like, "man the machine gun!" and "take the jeep and get some ammo." Ads stress the importance of becoming expert at jungle warfare, bazooka use, counter-insurgency, and footlocker maintenance. (G.I. Joe, by the way, has no sex organs or secondary sex characteristics, so apparently in this country weapons and uniforms assure masculinity.)

It occurs to me that most contemporary dolls are activated by pressing their tums or pulling their arms or by twisting or pulling something or other. Is it possible that the alarming increase in

infant battery is not caused by uptight parents after all, but by the work of confused siblings who are simply trying to make the baby "work" like dolly does?

A favorite niece, age four, recently attempted to show off her doll and found that it didn't work. Casting it aside, the four-year-old muttered, "the power pack is shot" and, as she took off in pursuit of her cat, called over her shoulder, "they just don't make dolls like they used to." Perhaps she had put her finger on another important difference between dolls of today and dolls of the past. Today's dolls are quickly discarded when they cease to do their "thing," while yesterday's dolls were lovingly passed down from one generation to the next.

Indeed, pernaps this apparently frivolous subject is, instead, a serious indication of much that is wrong with American society--boredom, the need to be entertained rather than entertaining, the readiness to discard that which no longer enchants, the complicated mechanical objects that don't work and defy repair, and the overall shoddiness of our products.

BUT--look now at the most pervasive and observable doll of the sixties and seventies--Mattel's Barbie. Barbie is the ultimate realistic fashion doll, with pretty legs, a tiny waist, and considerable cleavage fore and aft. (For those of you with a penchant for statistical data, Barbie's measurements in the 1967 Twist 'n Turn waist model were 5-1/4 - 3 - 4-1/2.) Always-dressed-for-today Barbie "lives" better than 30% of the real children in America. With her myriad of friends, her extensive wardrobe, and her accessories galore, Barbie symbolizes our penchant for conspicuous

consumption--our joy of acquisition. Face it--what Vogue and Esquire do for the status-conscious adult, Barbie and her pals do for the five-year-old crowd, and if the tot doesn't know all about haute couture by the time she's six, she either isn't trying or she's stupid. Right?

Barbie also teaches children about friendship, for she has Ken and Skipper and Francie and a black couple named Christie and Brad and hosts of others (excepting any orientals, Mexicans or American Indians). She teaches children about people.

And, of course, children learn a great deal about cultural artifacts such as wigs, wiglettes, skates, boots, purses, hats, sunglasses, tennis rackets, dune buggies, jet planes, bikes, skis, beauty parlors, boutiques, rock discotheques, penthouses, mobile campers, and hundreds of other objects that all Americans want and need.

Battery-operated "Action dolls" like Barbie and C-celled alter-egos like "Tippie Toes"--who drives a plastic go cart, stands on her head, and turns summersaults--impede children from exercising imagination and having satisfactory fantasy experience, one of the most beneficial aspects of dramatic play. It is not the failure of our omnipresent technology but the failure of imagination that makes me angry about these talking dolls. One recent talking doll television ad shows a girl saying "I love you" to a doll that repeats the message, a la Howard Cosell, by instant replay. The ad depicts the child's joy; it cannot depict the opportunity she has lost to invent a true dialogue.

The phrase "living doll" has been used to describe pretty girls--especially those with artificial, overly-decorative

prettiness. The phrase might also be applied to the primitive robots that our children play with. For children now seem to wait upon doll machines which are mini-robots perhaps presaging larger robot playthings of the future. After all, man has long attempted to produce a working simulacrum of a living organism--Pinocchio, the Tin Woodman and Scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz, the toy soldiers in the Nutcracker Suite, the Frankenstein monster, the Sorcerer's Apprentice, and many others. Even in Newton's time, stiffly pirouetting effigies adorned the tops of clockwork music boxes. Or consider the cruel fate of the hero in the Waltzing Doll episode of Offenbach's Tales of Hoffman, during which the hero becomes enamored with a "living doll," only to discover when she falls apart, that she is only a doll. Is it possible that today's dolls portend robot-like dolls of the future, computer-controlled, sophisticated actualizations of our fear of domination by machines? Is it possible that, in a few years, when one sees a "living doll," that may be exactly what one sees?